

## ALEXANDER POPE'S *AN ESSAY ON MAN*: A LOCKEAN PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

A fundamental aspect of Alexander Pope's poetry is his acute observation on the condition of mankind and the limits imposed on their knowledge as elaborated in his *opus magnum* or 'great work' *An Essay on Man*; Pope's poem echoes doctrines widely shared at the time by enlightened minds such as John Locke, doctrines upon which the optimism of the eighteenth century generally rested. This study presents a Lockean analysis of Pope's *Essay* in the context of Enlightenment. It addresses the extent of human understanding and knowledge with regard to himself, the world and God. In this respect the idea of Enlightenment is the key to understanding both Pope's poem and John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Despite developments in new sciences both Locke and Pope remain optimistic and maintain their faith in God. They highlight the limitations of human reason and warn against intellectual presumptuousness.

**Key words:** A. Pope, *An Essay on Man*, Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Enlightenment

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In an age marked by the ascendancy of reason the idea of Enlightenment exerted a great impact on the artistic and intellectual spirit of the age. As a social, political, and literary movement which dominated Europe from the second half of the seventeenth century to the late eighteenth century, the aim of the free-thinking writers of the movement was to address life by way of scientific observation and rational touchstones rather than through blind adherence to religion, tradition, and social conventions. The emergence of experimental sciences in the seventeenth century conducted especially by Francis Bacon's scientific experiments played a crucial role in the rise of the movement. As Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) observe:

Enlightenment's program was the disenchantment of the world. It wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge. Bacon, "the father of experimental philosophy," brought these motifs together. He despised the exponents of tradition, who substituted belief for knowledge and were as unwilling to doubt as they were reckless in supplying answers. (P.2)

The development in new sciences such as physics and to a lesser extent chemistry had also a major impact on the growth of this intellectual spirit; natural laws developed by scientists such as Isaac Newton (1642–1727) or Robert Boyle (1627–91) proved the wisdom and goodness of God in creating the universe. This mode of optimism was also shared by English thinkers and writers such as John Locke and Alexander Pope.

Crucial to the intellectual adventure of Enlightenment thinking, Terry (2009) observes, was "a trust in reason to dispel accumulated dogma and superstition. This manifested itself in religious terms in deism, the belief that religious convictions should be defensible on rational grounds rather than purely through faith" (p.124). The German philosopher Kant (as Cited in Simpson & Jones, 2013, p. 12), one of the greatest Enlightenment thinkers, observed that enlightenment is the:

Emergence of man from his self-imposed infancy. Infancy is the inability to use one's reason without the guidance of another. It is self-imposed, when it depends on a deficiency, not of reason, but of the resolve and courage to use it without external guidance. Thus the watchword of enlightenment is: *Sapere aude!* Have the courage to use one's own reason!

The key spokesmen of the movement, if not all, shared many of these characteristics. In this context the English philosopher John Locke enjoys a unique position.

### 2. JOHN LOCKE AND LIMITS OF HUMAN UNDERSTANDING

The English philosopher John Locke (1632 –1704) hailed as the first of British empiricists in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* claimed that at birth the human mind was like a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate upon which experience records itself as human knowledge. The fact that there are certain principles, both speculative and practical, universally agreed upon by all mankind "it would not prove them innate" (book I, p. 28); all ideas come "from sensation or reflection" (book II, p. 87); the objects of sensation and the operations of our mind are fountains from which "experience furnisheth the understanding with ideas" (ibid.).

As one of the most influential thinkers of Enlightenment, Locke in his *Essay* observes that "it is the understanding that sets man above the rest of sensible beings, and gives him all the advantage and dominion which he has over them" (Introduction, p.22); by inquiring into the nature of human understanding, Locke states, he can discover its powers, that is, how far they reach, to what things they are in any degree proportionate, and where they fail us:

I suppose it may be of use to prevail with the busy mind of man to be more cautious in meddling with things exceeding its comprehension; to stop when it is at the utmost extent of its tether; and to sit down in a quiet ignorance of those things which, upon examination, It brings human beings great advantage in directing their thoughts in search of other things. (ibid. 24)

For him awareness of the extent of our understanding is necessary since in this state we may learn to content ourselves with what is attainable by us:

When we know our own strength, we shall the better know what to undertake with hopes of success; and when we have well surveyed the powers of our own minds, and made some estimate what we may expect from them, we shall not be inclined either to sit still, and not set our thoughts on work at all, in despair of knowing anything; or, on the other side, question everything, and disclaim all knowledge, because some things are not to be understood. (ibid. p.25)

Locke is aware of the limitations of human understanding and claims that there are things which cannot be grasped by human mind; in this regard he uses the analogy of the sailor: "It is of great use to the sailor to know the length of his line, though he cannot with it fathom all the depths of the ocean ... to direct his voyage, and caution him against running upon shoals that may ruin him." (ibid.) One of the insightful pronouncements of John Lock in this essay is that as rational creatures "*Our business here is not to know all things, but those which concern our conduct*" (ibid. my italic). Hence he claims that:

If we can find out those measures whereby a rational creature, put in that state in which man is in this world, may and ought to govern his opinions, and actions depending thereon, we need not to be troubled that some other things escape our knowledge. (ibid., pp. 25-26)

He warns against scepticism that results from men's "extending their inquiries beyond their capacities, and letting their thoughts wander into those depths where they can find no sure footing," since it leads them to raising questions and multiplying disputes which never come to any clear resolution, "only to continue and increase their doubts, and to confirm them at last in perfect scepticism." (ibid., p. 26) A major aspect of Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is his reminiscence upon man's knowledge of God, the idea of "a supreme Being, infinite in power, goodness, and wisdom, whose workmanship we are, and on whom we depend;" and in line with it "the idea of ourselves, as understanding, rational creatures, being such as are clear in us, would, I suppose, if duly considered and pursued, afford such foundations of our duty and rules of action as might place morality amongst the sciences capable of demonstration" (book IV, Chapter III, p. 540).

He argues that though God has not given human beings an innate idea of Himself, yet He has not left Himself without witness. For him the clear proof of God is to be found in each person's consciousness of himself since human beings have been endowed with "sense, perception, and reason" (ibid., chapter X, p. 612) and thus "from the consideration of ourselves, and what we infallibly find in our own constitutions, our reason leads us to the knowledge of this certain and evident truth,-- That there is an eternal, most powerful, and most knowing Being" (ibid., p. 614); Locke's philosophical observations regarding God and human's relation to Him find their vivid expression in Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Man* which in a similar fashion aims at proving the wisdom and goodness of God in His creation of the universe.

### 3. ALEXANDER POPE'S ESSAY: A LOCKEAN PERSPECTIVE

Although as a Roman Catholic he could not attend mainstream schools and university, vote or hold public office, this did not prevent him from pursuing his independent exploration of the artistic as well as intellectual trends of the day. Believing that the life of a wit was a warfare on earth, throughout his artistic life he devoted himself to an investigation of the follies and misunderstandings of his age. Indeed, the private condition of his life colored his public career as a man of letters: "he developed a position of moral authority derived from his own status as a private, right-thinking citizen, living in principled independence of state patronage, willing to implicate the personal experience on which his voice as a social critic was based" (Baines, 2001, p. 5). Nevertheless, Pope appears as a public voice of neoclassical England in his general pronouncements on the nature of universe and man's place in it.

Pope's *An Essay on Man*, in four epistles, is a statement of his philosophical, political, and ethical principles. Its Miltonic objective is to "vindicate the ways of God to man" (epistle I, 16). Epistle one of the poem centers on the nature and state of man with respect to the universe. "The typical early-eighteenth-century writer was well enough aware that the universe as a whole is physically an extremely large and complicated thing" (Lovejoy, 2001, p. 8). Pope is no exception here; addressing his philosopher-friend Lord Bolingbroke, he invites him to expatiate on the structure of the universe, "this scene of man" / "A mighty maze! but not without a plan" (Lines 5-6). He draws close attention to the complexity of this mighty maze:

He, who thro' vast immensity can pierce,  
See worlds on worlds compose one universe,  
Observe how system into system runs,  
What other planets circle other suns,  
What vary'd being peoplesev'ry star,  
May tell why Heav'n has made us as we are.  
(ibid., lines 23-28)

In his philosophical exploration of this wild scene "where weeds and flowers promiscuous shoot; Or garden, tempting with forbidden fruit" (ibid., lines 7-8) he poses a Lockean question regarding the extent of man's knowledge of God or himself: "Say first, of God above, or man below, / What can we reason, but from what we know?" (lines 17-18). In tracing the issue in "a poem that is infused with Renaissance reworkings of classical thought" (Fairer, 2007, p. 96), Pope draws on the idea of 'the great chain of being,' and presents a rationalistic account of the nature of man and his position in the universe. The idea centers on the conception of the universe:

as a "Great Chain of Being," composed of an immense, or -- by the strict but seldom rigorously applied logic of the principle of continuity of an infinite, number of links ranging in hierarchical order from the meagerest kind of existents, which barely escape nonexistence, through "every possible" grade up to the *ens perfectissimum* -- or, in a somewhat more orthodox version, to the highest possible kind of creature, between which and the Absolute Being the disparity was assumed to be infinite everyone of them differing from that immediately above and that immediately below it by the "least possible" degree of difference. (Lovejoy, 2001, P. 59)

In this respect, Pope refers to the existence of "strong connections, nice dependencies, / Gradations just" (I, lines 30-31), in the system of universe and poses the questions:

Is the great chain, that draws all to agree,  
And drawn support, upheld by God, or thee?  
Presumptuous man! the reason wouldst thou find,  
Why form'd so weak, so little, and so blind!  
First, if thou canst, the harder reason guess,  
Why form'd no weaker, blinder, and no less!  
Ask of thy mother earth, why oaks are made  
Taller or stronger than the weeds they shade?  
(I, lines 33-40)

Pope's response to these questions suggests his optimism regarding the system of universe and man's place in "the scale of reasoning life" which is given full expression in these lines:

Of systems possible, if 'tis confessed  
That *Wisdom Infinite* must form the best,  
Where all must full or not coherent be,  
And all that rises, rise in due degree;  
Then, *in the scale of reasoning life*, 'tis plain,  
There must be, somewhere, such a rank as man:  
And all the question (wrangle e'er so long)  
Is only this, if God has placed him wrong?  
(ibid., my italic, lines 43-50)

God, that "Wisdom Infinite", has formed the best universe for mankind and "in the scale of reasoning life" there is such a link as man. This leads Pope to conclude that no matter how complex, inscrutable or wrong the scheme of universe may seem to humans, it functions in a rational fashion and according to natural principles. Addressing mankind he states that: "Respecting man, whatever wrong we call, / May, must be right, as relative to all." (ibid., lines 51-52) This is because "'Tis but a part we see, and not a whole" (ibid., line 60). This ostentatious modesty in the recognition of the disproportion between man's intellect and the universe, as Lovejoy (2001) mentions, "was one of the most prevalent intellectual fashions of a great part of the eighteenth century" (p. 9). It finds its expression also in epistle two where Pope refers to the limits of the mind of a scientist such as Newton:

Could he, whose rules the rapid Comet bind,  
Describe or fix one movement of his Mind  
Who saw its fires here rise, and there descend,  
Explain his own beginning, or his end?  
(II, lines 35-8)

Indeed, to Pope the idea of the great chain of being is emblematic of an immense "chain of Love" that pervades all elements in the universe and forms an organic unity in which "parts relate to whole":

Look round our World; behold the chain of Love  
Combining all below, and all above. (III, lines 7-8)  
...  
Nothing is foreign: Parts relate to whole;  
One all-extending, all-preserving Soul  
Connects each being, greatest with the least;  
Made Beast in aid of Man, and Man of Beast;  
All serv'd, all serving! nothing stands alone;  
The chain holds on, and where it ends, unknown.  
(III, lines 21-26)

The idea of the great chain of being is basically linked to the idea of order in the whole universe; as Donald (2006) in her discussion of the concepts of order in the eighteenth century state, at the time order in the human sphere was conceived of as "a microcosm of the order which prevailed in the entire universe under the directing hand of God" (p. 1). In an age of scientific discoveries where Newtonian principles were prevalent, Pope in his edifying rhetoric highlights that there is a rational order in the universe. Acknowledging Order as "Heaven's first law" (IV, line 49), he warns human beings against their intellectual presumptuousness:

Cease then, nor ORDER imperfection name:  
Our proper bliss depends on what we blame  
Know thy own point: This kind, this due degree  
Of blindness, weakness, Heaven bestows on thee.  
Submit... (I, lines 281-285)

"This pose of intellectual modesty was, in fact, an almost universally prevalent characteristic of the period, which Locke, perhaps, more than anyone else had brought into fashion" (Lovejoy, 2001, p.8) Echoing John Locke, Pope believes that human beings enjoy a "due degree of blindness" and "weakness;" hence, against the temptations of the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge they should submit to the will of God. Much in the same vein, he points out the limitations of human beings and the extent of their knowledge and understanding. As he states:

All nature is but art, *unknown* to thee;  
All Chance, direction, which thou canst not see;  
All discord, harmony, *not understood*;  
All partial evil, universal good.  
(I, my italic, lines 289-292)

In vindicating the ways of God to men Pope's ethical advice is self-knowledge: Know then thyself, presume not God to scan; / The proper study of Mankind is Man. (II, 1-2) Although Some critics such as Sherburne and Bond (2005) have referred to the deistic bias of these epistles, that "Pope was trying to build a rational or empirical system of ethics independent of metaphysics or religion, but without denying the latter" (p. 929), crucial to Pope's ethical understanding is his firm belief in that "Wisdom Infinite who has formed the best of possible systems. To him one truth is clear and that is "Whatever is, is right" (I, line 294).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In an age of the ascendancy of reason the idea of Enlightenment exerted a major influence on the intellectual and artistic spirit of the age; despite the developments in new sciences, intellectuals and ethical thinkers such as John Locke and Alexander Pope maintained their belief in the rational operation of the world by an "Wisdom Infinite" or an eternal "most knowing Being," who conducts the world according to established rules. Both writers stress the limits of human reason and understanding and warn against humans' extending their inquiries beyond their intellectual power; John Locke in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* observes that one's business is not to understand every thing but those things which concern one's conduct. There are things which are beyond humans' comprehension and escape their knowledge. Hence as creatures endowed with sense, perception and reason, human beings should avoid wandering into those depths where they find no sure footing. Locke's *Essay* might be seen as a lens on Pope's *An Essay on Man*; in the same vein, Pope stresses the limits of human understanding. In "vindicating the ways of God to men" he draws on the idea of the great chain of being and posits that human beings enjoy a due degree of blindness and weakness. Hence, they must submit to the will of God. He sees universe as a mighty maze or a complicated structure but not without a plan. To him all nature is art but unknown to human beings.

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